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ABSTRACT

Noting that a partnership between early childhood programs and the families they serve is essential, this guide encourages early childhood administrators to make available a variety of parent involvement options in their program from which parents can make choices that meet their needs. The guide's introduction offers questions to consider while preparing a "menu" of options for parents, and lists the five components of a successful menu: (1) sharing information with parents and families; (2) welcoming parents and families; (3) involving parents and families in the program; (4) supporting learning at home; and (5) working with the community. The chapters then explore options within each of these 5 components. Each chapter covers basic ideas, lists "menu suggestions" or best practices for accomplishing the component, and then elaborates on these suggestions in a "practices that work" section. A checklist of these practices from each chapter is appended. (Contains 13 references.) (HTH)

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Menu

for Successful Parent & Family Involvement

by Paul Wirtz and Bev Schumacher

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Introduction

When you go to a restaurant, a menu is provided for you to make your food selections. Such a menu provides ideas, choices, and valuable information. The menu makes ordering easier and the dining experience more pleasant by allowing customers to decide what suits their tastes and needs.

Such an array of choices may already exist at your early childhood care and education program. Enrolling a child in your program means working with the family to assure that the needs of the child are met. A partnership between the home and your program is essential. When programs make available a variety of options, parents can make choices that meet their needs.

Making a menu that clearly shares what is available gives parents and families ideas, options, and valuable information, while also providing an opportunity for your program to identify what it offers. Families won't necessarily choose everything listed, but a menu serves as an opportunity for parents and families to make choices that address their tastes and needs.

The Benefits of Involving Parents and Families

Quality programs must consider how they will work with parents and families as well as with children! Families make critical decisions about early childhood care and education programs for their young children. Successful programs recognize the partnership needed between families and programs.

- Researchers (Epstein, 2000, Lewis and Henderson, 1997, and Henderson, 1995) have shown that programs that effectively involve parents have a more significant impact on children's learning. Children and parents enrolled in these programs gain more from their experiences.

- Deborah Eldridge (2001) asked the question, "Is parent involvement worth the effort?" Her broad review of research and practices strongly supported its benefits. The time spent involving parents and families will pay off! Your program will see greater student achievement, more parent satisfaction, and improvement in quality.
- Susan Neuman, Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education, identified improved relationships with parents as a key area to be addressed during the 2001 White House Summit on Early Childhood Cognitive Development (Bean, 2001).

This booklet presents a menu for successful involvement of parents and families in early childhood care and education programs. It is a menu of information and "ideas that work," helping you explore and identify ways to make stronger connections with parents and families.

Questions to Ask as You Prepare Your Menu

- ✔ What will you include on your menu of parent involvement?
- ✔ Are you providing a menu or waiting for parents and families to ask what is available?
- ✔ How will your menu be shared with parents and families?
- ✔ Do parents like what is offered? Will they choose from what is offered?
- ✔ Will parents be pleased enough to tell others to come?
- ✔ Have you considered offering a few good choices rather than a large variety?
- ✔ Is your entire staff prepared to serve what is on the menu?
- ✔ Is there enough variety on your menu to keep it appealing?

The Five Components of a Successful Menu

A well balanced parent and family involvement menu is essential for healthy parent-school partnerships. Prepare your involvement menu using the following five components:

- Sharing Information with Parents and Families
- Welcoming Parents and Families
- Involving Parents and Families in the Program
- Supporting Learning at Home
- Working With the Community

Make your home-school relationship menu appealing, diverse, and healthy. Remember that the families you work with vary greatly. Their work, available time, family size, and circumstances are unique, and therefore your plans must take into account family needs and differences. Include in your menu each essential component, and work with these components to build a successful partnership with parents and families in your program.

What to Look For in Each Chapter

The five menu components will be explored in separate chapters. Each chapter contains valuable ideas to help you create a program that will nourish and strengthen parent and family partnerships.

Chapters contain three sections, each of which are designed to help you plan and implement a menu for your program:

"Basic Ideas" explains why the component is important.

"Menu Suggestions" lists the best practices for creating your menu. Each suggested idea is expanded upon in the "Practices that Work" section.

"Practices that Work" describes the best of the "good ideas" used by successful teachers and programs. Each suggested practice is described in this section. Consider how you can use these ideas for your menu. Some ideas may become regular menu items, while some may be added to your menu for short periods of time. Remember that every menu item will not have the same appeal to every customer. Programs and parents have unique needs, so individualize as needed to make your program work.

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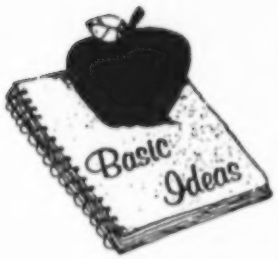
Sharing Information with Parents and Families



Teacher ⟷ Parent

Communication with parents and families must be two-way. Always follow the 3 X 3 **rule:** send important information at least 3 times and in 3 different ways. Invite parents to exchange ideas with you and other parents. Establish a communication process early in the program year and make many and varied contacts with parents.

_____ Face-to-face conversations
_____ Positive phone calls
_____ Happy notes
_____ Awards and certificates
_____ Greeting cards, post cards and invitations
_____ Handwritten notes in response to parent requests
_____ E-mail/FAXES
_____ Reminder stickers
_____ Parents sign and return items
_____ Notes on children's work

Face-to-Face Conversations

Face-to-face conversations represent the best opportunity for parents and teachers/program directors to exchange information. During these conversations you can do the following:

- Invite parents to tell you their hopes for the child.
- Find out what their concerns are for their children.
- Get to know the child and the family.
- Use the time to tell them "good news" about their children.
- Share a program goal or success.
- Introduce a growth area for their child: the skilled educator tries to work in co-operation with the parents on goals set.
- Use your smile and body language to build working relationships.

What can you do if a parent is always in a hurry and not open to a conversation?

- ✔ Make a positive phone call or write a note.
- ✔ Schedule a time for a conversation
- ✔ Get to know the family better. The parent may be uncomfortable or in a time crunch. Maintain your positive attitude and warm welcome.

Make a goal to talk to members of each family. Practicing sample conversations can be helpful for new or insecure staff members. Some conversations can be "one-minute conferences" at drop-off or pick-up times. Longer conversations can be planned before the year begins or early in the school year. Keep records of conversations with each family, and make brief notes about each child. If any concerns were noted, plan to revisit those issues with that family.

Positive Phone Calls

Positive phone calls are a must and can be made as soon as you have your list of students. They also are helpful when parents are

not available for face-to-face conversations. Calls should be brief and include:

- A brief description of who you are and what you "value".
- Your goal(s) for their child.
- The parents' hopes or ideas for their child
- Responses to any questions parents may have.
- Class topics or plans.
- An invitation to upcoming events or activities.
- A plan to keep communications open for the future.

Positive Phone Call Script:

Introductions

Share excitement, values, goals and plans

Invite sharing of information, involvement, and participation

Ask about any questions or concerns

Hi! I am looking forward to being _____'s teacher. One of our goals is to promote literacy. We want children to be excited about books.

Hi! I am your name, (child's name) teacher. I enjoy reading will share books with your child everyday

Hi! I am your name, (child's name) teacher. I value parents being involved and look forward to working with you.

Hi! I am your name, (child's name) teacher. I love doing art. We will have many activities in our classroom for the children to explore art and creativity

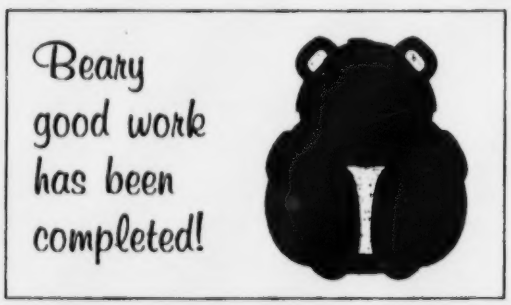
Set a goal to make a specific number of positive phone calls to each student and his or her family throughout the year. Remember to keep a record of calls and other parent contacts by creating a folder or roster checklist of "Parent/family Communication." Contacts can also be noted on the files you keep for each student.

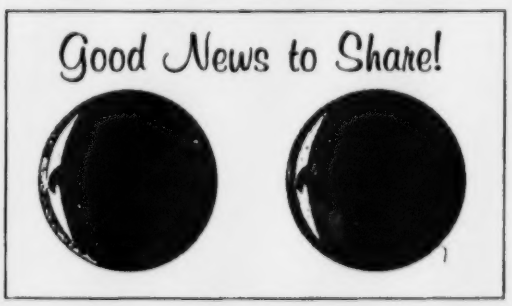
At some point you may need to use a phone call to share a problem with a student's family. Having good communication experiences with the family will open the door for those later, less positive contacts you might have to make.

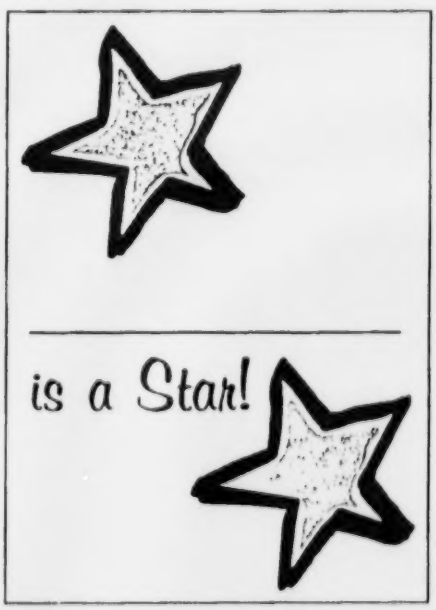
Happy Notes

Happy notes are positive, cheerful notes that share good news. They give you a chance to report a child's success to his or her parents. These notes also keep families informed and involved by telling them what the program and child are working on.

Notices can be handwritten on colored paper, specially cut paper, or computer generated. Books with samples for you to copy, as well as software, are available in school supply stores and catalogs. Here are a few happy note examples:







Awards and Certificates

Like the happy notes, awards and certificates give special recognition. Give them to students one to four times per year for reaching certain goals, or to parents for making special contributions. These awards and certificates can be purchased or easily made on a computer, and this activity can serve as an involvement opportunity if you invite a parent with computer skills to prepare them. Use color and graphics when making the awards and certificates.

Some reasons for awarding certificates:

- Personal growth achievements: being a special friend to someone, tying one's shoes for the first time, remembering to bring things in, or other special accomplishments.
- Learning achievements: reading one's first book, writing one's first book, or completing certain projects.
- Parent contributions: completing items/props for the class, volunteering a certain number of hours, reading with their child for a certain number of hours, and the like.

Outstanding
Parent Involvement Award

Mary Howard prepared four sets of a new learning game.

I did something GREAT today!

(Describe the great event for parents.)

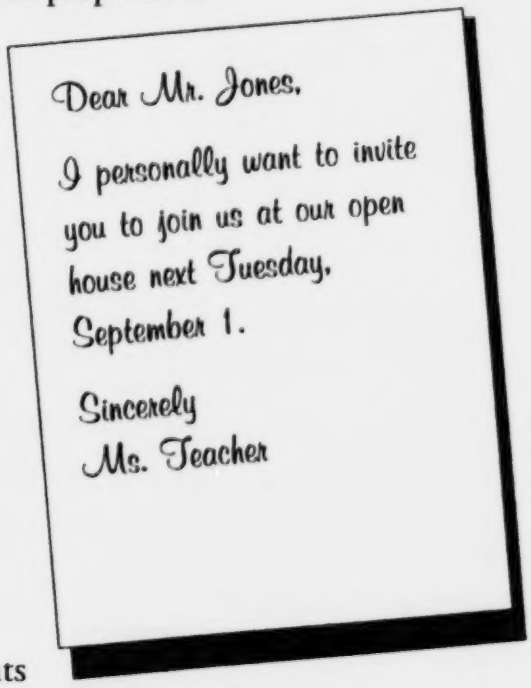
_____
Child Signs

_____
Teacher Signs

Greeting Cards, Post Cards, and Invitations

The personal touch of cards mailed to a child's home is powerful. They say, "I value you!" Cards can recognize special happenings or be invitations to events. This approach can also be used to recognize contributions, participation, or attendance. Some tips for using greeting cards, post cards, and invitations:

- Remember the rule introduced earlier—**3 X 3**. Send information three times and in three different ways. (Follow up invitations or messages with other reminders.)
- Address labels can be prepared to save time and effort.
- General information can be preprinted.
- Adding notes, handwritten names, or using the child's name are "I care connections".
- Parents may be willing to use their computer skills to create cards and invitations for you.



Handwritten Notes in Response to Parent Requests

Handwritten notes give parents individualized, personal communication, and are an effective response to parents' questions or concerns. For example, a handwritten note may inform parents of how their child is behaving this week since his grandmother died. These notes are an important part of two-way communication because parents are sharing, but also asking for input. Some key thoughts when using handwritten notes:

- Date, record and keep notes sent from parents in a folder
- Respond promptly to notes that require an answer

- Keep notes brief and have a co-worker proofread your work
- Address the parent's issue in your note.
- Keep a copy of the response you send and have a system to assure that notes get delivered
- Gather a variety of stationary and cards, and keep supplies for note writing in a convenient location

What can you do when you get a question you cannot answer?

✔ Find an article or information from a book on the issue and make parents a copy.

✔Because this may prove to be a repeat issue, study and learn more about it for the future.

E-mail/Faxes

E-mail and faxes are increasingly common in homes and at work. Classrooms, teachers, and programs can use the Internet to easily and quickly keep in touch with families. In addition, E-mail systems and faxes can record or save information, and so are helpful because you can refer to them later. Requests for family E-mail and fax addresses should be included on registration materials for each student, and be sure and share address and fax numbers for parents to reach you as well.

Enrollment Form for _____

Student's Name_____ Nickname _____

Parent Information:

FATHER	MOTHER
Name _____	Name_____
Address_____	Address _____
City _____	City _____
State_____ Zip _____	State_____ Zip_____
Day Phone _____	Day Phone_____
Night Phone _____	Night Phone _____
Cell Phone _____	Cell Phone_____
Best time to receive phone calls _____	Best time to receive phone calls _____
E-mail _____	E-mail _____
FAX _____	FAX_____

Reminder Stickers

Daily lives are filled with demands that pull families in many directions each week. Reminder stickers/labels can be a quick and effective way to keep in touch.

Unlike paper notices, reminder stickers and labels can be placed where they will get attention. For example, if today's the day when papers and announcements are in a child's backpack, place a sticker on it that says: "Look in my backpack!"

Labels can be easily prepared on label or sticker paper or run off on a computer. Try placing them on the front of a backpack, on a lunch container, or on the student. An early care program shared their practice of sticking notes to baby's diapers.

Look in my backpack! Important papers for you!

Come to our
SPECIAL EVENT

Date: *Time:* *Where:*

Reminder:

We are celebrating the _____ holiday Monday.

No School

Reminder stickers printed on card stock can be attached to zippers or shoelaces. Pinned-on notices work, too.

Read me a book.

Bring a book to school tomorrow

Parent Sign and Return Items

Parents are much more likely to read a note, report, or announcement if they have to sign and return the note. Briefly state your message on the top half of a sheet and have a parent sign the bottom half and return. Weekly folders or envelopes establish a routine for delivering information. Parents can be asked to place their signatures on the folder or their children's work and return it. Keep the lines of communication open by providing a space next to the signature line inviting parent comments or questions.

Sign and Return.
I have read the unit plan and understand the teaching goals for this unit.

_____, _____
Parent Date

Questions? / Comments

_____

_____

Weekly News Envelope
Growing Place Preschool

Teacher: _____

Date: _____

_____

_____

_____

Parent Signature

Notes on Children's Work

Notes on children's work can be used to draw parents' attention to a new skill or level of performance. Share the note with the child and encourage them to share the "good news" with their parents. Stickers, stamps, as well as written comments can be used. Be sure to be clear and specific about what is being noted.

Examples: Good writing!
Interesting picture! Many colors!
What an interesting story!

Sometimes the note might be a badge or suggestion to the parent:

- "Discuss (a book read, an activity completed, learning station)",
- "Have Child's name tell you about (make a topic suggestion)" or
- "Please call me about (make parent aware of need or issue)."

We studied the letter **S** today. See how many "S" words can be found on your way home
Call me about a time for our parent conference next week.
Tell your family about the firefighter who visited our class.

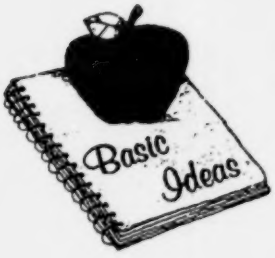
Chapter Summary

Using the ideas about communication presented in this chapter, consider how your involvement menu may be prepared.

- What communication practices are working for your program? Ask parents for input.
- What do parents pay the most attention to?
- What gets parents to not only receive information, but also to send information back to you? This information will help build a working partnership.
- Are all parents getting the information? What can close communication gaps with hard to reach families or parents?
- Which staff members need support in strengthening communication?
- Are staff members communicating well with other staff so that parent questions can be answered?
- What ideas from the chapter do you want to remember?
- What can you include on your menu to address communication with parents and families?

Refer to Appendix A for a Chapter 1 checklist for preparing your menu.

Welcoming Parents and Families



Every program needs policies and practices that state:

"Parents and families are wanted and needed by this program."

Ways to achieve this goal:

- Provide a parent space in each school and classroom.
- Provide special events for the whole family.
- Develop parent involvement and program goals with the entire staff.
- Create a warm, sincere atmosphere that says, "We value YOU and YOUR CHILD!"
- Display statements reflecting this welcome message where staff, parents and families will see them.
- Seek parent input on decisions and program evaluations.

_____ Mention "parents and families" in program descriptions

_____ Provide parent places

_____ Maintain parent information stations

_____ Schedule special events

Family + Fun + Food = Successful Program

_____ Prepare parent nametags for visits and events

_____ Recognize parents at school programs

_____ Establish awards and certificates for parent contributions

_____ Approach every parent with a smile and positive greeting

_____ Be sensitive to families' diverse needs

_____ Promptly acknowledge parent questions and concerns

Mention "Parents and Families" in Program Descriptions

Include a section on "Goals for Parents" in flyers or brochures. Consider statements such as:

- We keep parents informed.
- We want and need parents to participate.
- Parents are a child's most important teacher.

Establish program policies that include involvement with parents and families. These could include:

- How staff members will communicate with parents (determine minimum frequency-week, month, as suitable for program type and objectives).
- How contact with parents will be documented.
- How records will be kept for parent requests and their ensuing actions.
- How staff members will maintain strong family connections and exchange information.
- How criteria for hiring staff, based on their ability and willingness to involve parents and families are developed.
- How parents can practice skills and concepts being taught.

Provide Parent Places

Parents should be encouraged to visit your program, and when they arrive you need to be prepared for their visit. Plan these visiting procedures, including designating a welcome spot for parents who come to visit or assist at your program. Most importantly, consider parents as partners rather than visiting guests.

Answering the following questions can guide you in creating a procedure for welcoming parents to observe or volunteer at your program:

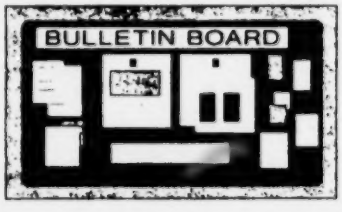
- Can you designate parent parking spaces?
- Where should parents report when arriving?

- Is there a place for coats and personal items?
- Will you provide nametags or badges?
- Where should the parents sit?
- Are instructions for them clear and simple?
- Are restrooms available, clean, and welcoming for guests?
- Can reading material or classroom information be available in your parent spot?
- Is it possible to have coffee or refreshments for parents?
- Do you recommend visiting times that would best serve your program and its families?

Maintain Parent Information Stations

Program staff members are generally very busy. Basic welcome and information sharing can be accomplished with a display, such as postings on a parent bulletin board, on a wall, door, TV monitor, table, or counter. At pick-up and drop-off times it can serve as a first stop for all parents and provide a place to exchange information. A parent information station may include:

- Welcoming statements, poems or a thought of the day
- Program information and brochures
- Cards requesting information for parents to complete
- Simple instructions for volunteers
- Pictures from the program
- Program goals
- Upcoming special events
- Community happenings
- Calendars
- Newsletters
- Mail boxes



Schedule Special Events

Family + Fun + Food = Successful Program

A welcoming program considers and plans for the whole family. Events outside of school are times to build stronger family connections, allow staff and families to get to know each other, and

strengthen feelings of community and partnership. Providing food increases socializing, but the refreshments need not be elaborate. It may even be possible to have students make the treats.

Whole family activities might include:

- Family picnic, dinner or ice cream social
- Dance or carnival
- Art show or book night
- Pizza party and movie
- Award ceremonies
- Holiday themed celebrations
- Speaker on a hot topic
- Outing to a community activity or location
- Family games or play times
- Parent breakfasts

Sometimes it is beneficial to limit programs to certain family members. Consider doing special things children or families don't normally get a chance to do, such as events for grandparents and children, a project night for fathers and children, ladies day out, or a gift making or buying session with the children and their siblings.

Things to consider when planning family programs:

- Provide childcare when the program is not designed for children of all ages.
- Plan events at a variety of times to allow for work and schedule issues. Repeating programs may result in more attendance.

What can you do when dollars are limited and you want to provide a special program?

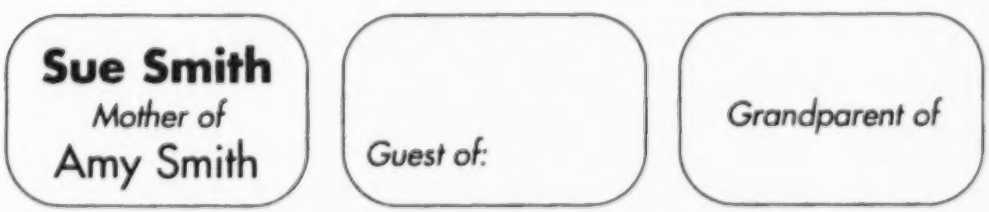
- Invite a local restaurant to provide the snack, and then strongly recognize their effort.
- Use a speaker from a community agency.
- Get a supporter like the PTA, PTO, a sorority, business partner, or community organization to help your effort.

- Avoid judging parents for absence at events, and celebrate the success of families who did come. For future activities make personal invitations to those families who were absent.
- Give parents who did not attend a summary of the program:
  - "Here are some handouts from our speaker last night."
  - "I made a video of our program. I know you were disappointed you missed it, but would you like to see the tape?"

Prepare Parent Nametags for Visits and Events

Wearing nametags can be beneficial in many ways. Nametags provide the "correct name," while also offering a comfortable way for parents to meet each other. Staff members wearing nametags or badges will be helpful to parents too. Here are some ideas for using nametags:

- Use the computer to prepare nametags.
- Be sure names are correct.
- Encourage children to decorate nametags. Stickers or stamps can add a special touch.
- Consider nametags that include the child's name.
- Ask a parent to help make nametags.
- Recognize volunteers with a durable nametag to make them feel their role is really important.
- Color coding or special designs can help you break attendees into groups or help make recognition easier. For example:
  - All first time parents may have one style of nametag while returning parents have another.
  - Board members may wear a special color so parents attending recognize their special position.
  - Morning parents could have a different color than afternoon parents.

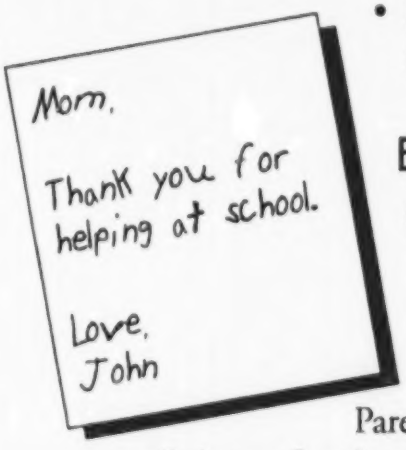


Recognize Parents at School Programs

Parents who come to programs are supporting their children's learning, so let them know you appreciate their attendance. Occasionally, ask parents to stand and be recognized for their involvement, praising them publicly for supporting their child, the program, and the teachers.

Programs are also appropriate times to note individual contributions.

- When you greet parents arriving at an event thank them for coming.
- Write special thank you notes for parent contributions.
- Have program directors call, write, or seek out parents for their involvement.



- Have children make artwork, write notes or dedicate a song to parents.

Establish Awards and Certificates for Parent Contributions

Give recognition to parent participation, involvement, and contributions. Parents should know you value their efforts, so tell them often how important their role is in making their child successful, happy, and comfortable with your program.

The following ideas can guide you in establishing awards and certificates for parent contributions:

- Include the parent's name and type of assistance on the certificate. This type of personalization makes the award more powerful.
- Buy ready-to-use awards and certificates from office and school supply stores or

catalogs, or make your own on the computer using inexpensive software. Award and certificate papers are available where paper and software products are sold.
- Make surprise presentations. These can be a treat for parents and their children.

Greet Every Parent with a Smile and Positive Greeting

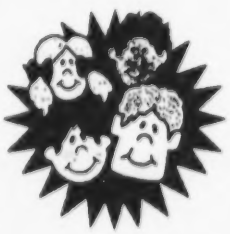
Set a positive tone at your program by greeting all arrivals with a smile and a positive attitude. These contacts set a valuable tone for building good relationships.

- Extend warm, sincere greetings to students and parents. The arriving student and parent should sense that they would have a good day. Parents want reassurance that their child is in good hands.
- Know and use the names of all students and families in your conversations. This is the mark of a caring staff, so make it a goal to be able to greet every parent and child by name.
- Help parents and children depart on a positive note, looking forward to returning.

There may be times when the lead teacher cannot meet the arriving or departing student's family. Because this exchange is so important in building the parent partnership, plan schedules to make these connections as often as possible. When direct connections are not made, the staff member making contact should be alert to any information they should be sharing with the family.

Be Sensitive to Families' Diverse Needs

Cultural diversity needs the attention of all staff. Your families will represent a variety of backgrounds and lifestyles, and each deserves the staff's acceptance.



Some ideas for enhancing cultural sensitivity in your program:

- Train staff to broaden knowledge and awareness. New early childhood staff members may have limited experience with the diverse backgrounds of the program's children and families. Each teacher needs to be aware and informed of the sensitivity and uniqueness of each child and family. A program administrator or senior staff member may approach this very unique training as a "mentorship" (Gnatuk and DeCosta, 1999).
- Consider translators for important meetings, software to produce documents in different languages and pictures and graphics to assist parents in decoding written communications. Language differences may make communication exchanges difficult. Children who are linguistically different from teachers or who have a learning challenge can be misunderstood or "mislabeled" (Esch, 2001). Such errors can have serious or hurtful effects upon the family and the child, and they can break down communication essential to effective parent/teacher relations (Walker-Dalhouse and Dalhouse, 2001).
- Gather information from parents about food restrictions that may be specific to their child's culture.
- Plan calendar programs and events with consideration of religious or other cultural celebrations.
- Review suggestions given in Chapter V, *Know Your Community and Neighborhood Culture.*

Promptly Acknowledge Parent Questions and Concerns

Issues and questions shared by parents need immediate attention. By responding to parent concerns immediately you can lessen the possible stress for all involved. Ways to approach family concerns might include:

- Tell parents, "Thank you for bringing that to my attention." These powerful words let parents know that their children are important to you.

- Gather information about the situation and get back to the parents as quickly as possible. A phone call may be necessary to promptly close concerns.
- Make a note to follow-up on the issue. Never assume that your sharing the concern with someone else will produce a solution. Check back with the family to be sure that they have heard from the person or agency to which you referred an issue. Calendar notes or post-it-notes work well as reminders. Do a one-week follow-up: "Has the issue you raised last week been resolved?" "What else can we do to work this out?"
- Accept that parents have a natural tendency to protect their children. Also realize they may not have accurate accounts of things that happen at school. Information reported by children, or even staff, can be one-sided and confused. Realize that upset parents are not targeting "you" when most issues are shared.
- Give immediate attention to negative statements or complaints. Issues can escalate out of control when left unattended. Good communication can catch problems when they happen.

What can you do when you have heard about a problem secondhand?

- ✔ Work to establish stronger two-way communication.
- ✔ Get to know parents better to build greater trust.
- ✔ Recognize that anger will serve no purpose, and put personal emotions aside.
- ✔ Tell the secondhand bearer, "Thank you for bringing that to my attention".
- ✔ Be sure to maintain confidentiality, but also be sure that all facts are available to those involved.
- ✔ State your program goals and assure parents you are there to work out any problems.
- ✔ Ask for their suggestions to resolve the issue.

Chapter Summary

Good communication is critical to instilling in families the feeling of being valued. Take every opportunity to learn from parents what your program is doing that is working, and what they feel needs to be improved.

- ✔ Find out what the community knows about the program.
- ✔ Discover what has caused families to leave. Is there anything that can be learned from their comments?
- ✔ Perception and reality are not always the same.
- ✔ Look objectively at your program, and consider which of the "Practices That Work" ideas might be added as you prepare your menu.

Refer to Appendix A for the Chapter 2 checklist for preparing your menu.

Chapter Three

Involving Parents and Families in the Program

Involving parents in the classroom and program provides them an opportunity to see:

- What children are experiencing and learning
- The involvement of their own children in daily events
- A fuller sense of what children are capable of and inclined to do
- How they can support learning

Making parents team players in your class and in your program begins with an invitation. Avoid making assumptions that parents are not willing or available to help, and approach parent involvement with an open mind. One of the biggest mistakes you can make is not asking parents to participate. Often parents don't understand that they are really wanted and expected to contribute.

_____ Ask parents for ideas, suggestions and feedback

_____ Involve parents in decision making

_____ Invite parents to help complete program work

_____ Invite parents to bring supplies

_____ Train parents for school experiences

_____ Use parents' help at class events and fieldtrips

_____ Use parents' expertise

_____ Acknowledge the help received from parents

_____ Train staff to work with parents

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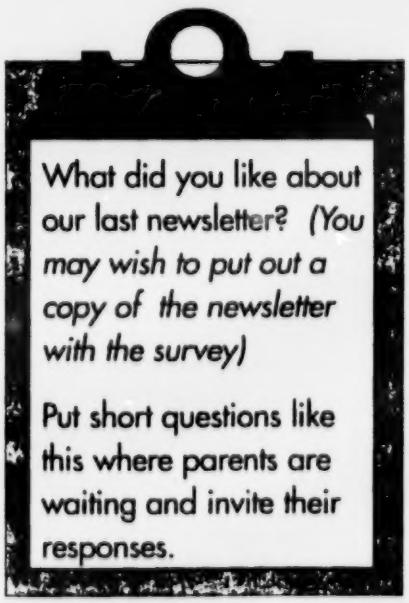
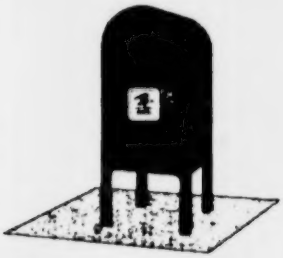
Ask Parents for Their Ideas, Suggestions, and Feedback

Getting a variety of perspectives can help you critically evaluate your program. Parents are your customers, and therefore control the continuation and progress of your program. Getting parent input is a low expense process that provides information, which can be valuable for the organization of your program. It will however, require some effort to invite the sharing of their thoughts. You will also have to invest some time to listen and respond. Here are some methods to consider in your information gathering process:

- Have a suggestion box.
- Ask," What do you think?" "What do you need?" "What did your child like?" "If we do that again what should we do differently?" These can be done in a discussion or on paper.
- If using a discussion approach to gather information, be sure to make notes and record responses. Write down the key questions on which you want feedback.
- If doing a paper survey, give a deadline for its return and include questions that invite input. Words such as who, what, how are good choices. Avoid questions that produce only Yes/No responses.
- At the end of a project or school year, get parent input. This information will help build a stronger program for the future.
- Create a generic summary tool asking: What did you like? What would make this activity better? How was the activity helpful to you and your child? What should we change? What should we add? Have this available to close programs or class activities.


What did you like about our last newsletter? *(You may wish to put out a copy of the newsletter with the survey)*
Put short questions like this where parents are waiting and invite their responses.



- Do not take offense at something shared. Sometimes parents' points of view help you to see things in a different way or to realize that your communication was not clear. At conference time, for example, one program gives parents a report card for them to grade the program.
- Ask parents to help evaluate the program periodically. Getting feedback should let you celebrate the success as well as improve weak areas.
- Invite parents for a conversation and refreshments. One program serves pie and calls the gathering a "Slice of Advise."

Involve Parents in Decision Making

The decisions your program makes will have an impact on the children you serve. Parent ideas, as well as involvement in parent councils and committees, enrich your planning and program quality. When parents have a voice in making a decision they will feel more responsible for supporting it, bolstering their sense of ownership in the program. Involve parents in decision making by:

- Utilizing an advisory committee or council.
- Taking an opinion poll before making a decision: "We are thinking about changing ... what do you think?"
- Making a display showing decision-making options: "We are thinking about purchasing (describe to parents the ideas considered, or options between comparable items). What do you think?"
- Inviting parents to make referrals. For example, if you need paintwork done at your center, ask families if they know someone to do the job. Maybe they will offer to help.

Invite Parents to Help Complete Program Work

Most parents want to support the work you are doing with their child. When parents or family members help in the program they

gain a better understanding of the program routine and the children enrolled. In addition, volunteers in the classroom can make it possible to accomplish more. Simple tasks completed by willing parents can free "teaching" time and increase one-to-one attention given to children.

- Your challenge is to match parents' interests with available time and skill. Some parents will gladly do anything asked, while others may prefer one task to another. Assigning a task beyond a parent's ability might scare away a willing helper. The safest way to avoid these pitfalls is to get to know the parents. Ask questions and read the body language. Keep a file of information about parents indicating their availability, the tasks in which they have expressed interest, and any offers they may have made to help. Follow up on comments and offers!
- A project box might provide parents the opportunity to do a project away from the school. Always provide a note explaining the tasks that need to be done. Giving a finished sample is also a great idea to get the expected results. Be sure to allow enough time for parents to complete the task, and keep a record of who took what home and when it needs to be completed. Consider one program approach to getting parent help. They put "to do projects" in a pizza box for parents to take home. They included all needed supplies and a completed sample to show the process.
- You may designate a bulletin board space for "Help Wanted" postings. Planning ahead will get projects done before you need them. It is good to break large tasks into smaller manageable steps. For example, one parent can set up refreshments for a program, another can serve, and a third can do the clean up.
- A parent volunteer space or area of the room can help you be organized when parents come in. In that area keep a list of tasks that parents can do for you. Also provide needed supplies. You might have a list of students or nametag stickers so classroom volunteers can get to know students.

- Keep a running list of tasks that can be done when you have the help of a volunteer, and prepare a list of volunteer options on which parents can sign up.
- Ask parents for their help. Be flexible so that you can use them at the times they are available. The beginning and end of the day may be convenient times for parents to share their time.
- The volunteer who feels appreciated and needed is more likely to come back. Say thank you, and let students say thank you, too.
- Remember, always train and review with parents what you want them to do.

What can you do when parents work and are too busy to help?

Lack of time is clearly a barrier to involvement. However, asking is a first step. If an activity is important, parents will often make arrangements to help.

- Breaking a task into small steps often makes it more acceptable. Asking for a 15-minute reader might produce a volunteer.
- Give options of small tasks that need to be done.
- Give advance notice of times help is needed.
- Ask for help for a limited time frame. Weekly volunteering might be too much to ask —getting several parents to each share a turn might be more doable.

Invite Parents to Bring Supplies

Asking for donated items can enrich your teaching resources. When parents bring in recycled items or surplus materials it costs them nothing. This provides usable resources but also gives parents who donate items a sense of program ownership. Creative teachers can find ways to use these donated items.

- Some parents may feel burdened by requests to buy supplies. Limit your requests for donations of bought items.

- Ask for disposable items that allow families to be involved without spending money. You may be able to use juice lids, plastic jars, coffee cans, milk jug lids, egg cartons, collage scraps, magazines, and the like for projects. Planning ahead can help you collect things in time for project deadlines.

Getting donated supplies gives parents a sense of program ownership.

- Collect labels or grocery receipts as another no-cost way to involve families.
- Business surplus items such as store posters, outdated envelopes and stationery, paper boxes, fabric samples, wallpaper books, outdated office equipment, and the like can be usable resources. Ask parents for work surplus items that could be shared with your program.
- Be aware of policies for bringing food to school. Parent-made snacks and treats may have to meet health guidelines.
- Clear requests can overcome some issues that might arise. For example, you would ask for paper towel tubes, but for hygiene reasons you would not request toilet tissue tubes.

Train Parents for School Experiences

Not all parents come with the same skills, but training can equip them with at least basic skills. Training empowers parents to work with the children in your program, gives parents insight into working with their child at home, and gives you an opportunity to better know the parents, their interests, and their skills. Importantly, these meetings will also give parents a chance to get acquainted with each other.

- Before parents volunteer, answer these questions:
  - What do I want the parents to accomplish?
  - What will they need to know to do this task?
  - Do they know the school rules and goals?
  - Do they know the staff and students that they will be working with?

- Are they able to handle issues confidentially?
- Are they comfortable finding their way around school?
- Which staff member will be responsible for monitoring the volunteer work?
- What workspace can be provided to them?
- What tools and resources will they need?
- What can be done to make them feel welcome and comfortable?

- Provide an orientation session. Introduce parents to routine procedures, help them find their way around, and introduce them to any equipment they may work with.
- Always have staff members present with volunteer helpers.
- What are the key ideas you want parents to know? Share these ideas verbally and in writing with parents.
- Invite them to return.
- Remember to say, "Thank you for helping".
- Follow-up with volunteers about their experience. Were they comfortable with the task? What would enrich the experience? Are they willing to help again?

What can you do for a volunteer training session?

- ✔ Tour of building
- ✔ Information about child development
- ✔ Classroom rules
- ✔ How to use equipment
- ✔ Introduction of volunteers and staff members
- ✔ Address confidentiality of student information

Use Parents' Help at Class Events and Fieldtrips

Parents enjoy class events, so use their help to make things run smoothly. Follow these guidelines when working with parents:

- A specific request to a parent may mean the difference between helping or not.
- State what help you need. Large needs can be broken down into several parts. Ask for a parent to put out snacks, and ask another to do the clean up.

- Be sure that the parent has an opportunity to enjoy the event planned as well as to help you out.
- Parents, especially those who work, that know of class events well in advance can often make arrangements to attend.
- Give parents as much information as possible to assure reliable help. Give them direction as to what the children should be doing and learning, and specifically define what you want parents to do. For example, your reading area might display a list of things important for shared reading.
- Be sure to tell parents how much their help is appreciated.
- Take time to recognize their efforts.

Reading Volunteers Can:

1. Ask open-ended questions. Begin with words like "who", "what", "when", "where" and "how"
2. Ask children to restate the story.
3. Look at the pictures in the book.
4. Share the name of the author and artist.

Volunteer Helpers Checklist

Dear parent, please put a check by those tasks you would be willing to help with.

__ Attend field trip
__ Serve refreshments at a program
__ Read to children
__ Create newsletter
__ Make phone calls
__ Computer work
__ Serve on advisory committee
__ Build and repair
__ Work on clean-up duties
__ Paint
__ Talk with students about your career
___ Share a hobby with the class
___ Help with computer

Use Parents' Expertise

Search for parents' talents and build on them. When directly asked to share their skills most parents are honored and pleased to help. Get to know the parents and families by asking:

- What are their careers and interests?
- Could they share information with your students?
- Could they take students on a work tour?
- Are they great organizers? Do they have helpful community contacts?
- Is a parent able to make repairs?
- Are there items that are surplus from their work that might help your program?
- Who could serve on your advisory group?

Acknowledge the Help Received from Parents

Make parents feel and know they are appreciated! Programs that have strong involvement practices use a variety of strategies to convey their appreciation:

> Take a picture of a volunteer and display it.

- The words "Thank You" are POWERFUL! Use them!
- Give face-to-face thanks when possible to express your appreciation for work done.
- Have other staff members and the program leaders share their appreciation.
- Children can also get in the "thank you" process by making a card or art project, singing a song, or sharing a project.
- Display "thank you notes," to give recognition.

We had _____parents join us on our field trip to _____. Our next field trip will be to _____on _____. We welcome you to join us!

(Combines recognition and welcomes others)

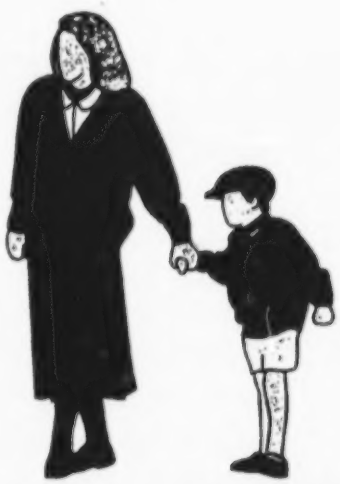
- Use public recognition so others realize the service given.
- Include highlights of parent work in your class newsletter and follow it with an invitation to others.
- Give small rewards or gifts as tokens of appreciation. Donated gift certificates, refreshments, free lunches, T-shirts, and other thoughtful gifts say "thank you!"
- Have a parent volunteer a meal, brunch, etc.
- See ideas listed in Chapter One about positive phone calls, happy notices, awards and certificates, greeting cards/post cards, and hand-written notes for other ideas.

Train Staff to Work With Parents

Staff members need to feel comfortable working with parents. Training and staff discussions about parents can increase partnerships with families. Your parent and family involvement program will be stronger when all staff members work toward the same goals.

All program staff members need knowledge and skills to effectively work with parents. Have them:

- Read articles on parent involvement and discuss them at staff meetings.
- Learn about family issues in the community. This can help the staff better understand the families they serve.
- Use checklists to measure parent involvement. Compare your evaluations with other staff and parents.
- Hold brainstorming sessions with staff to think of new ways to work with families and to review issues.
- Attend workshop and conference sessions about parent and family involvement.



Staff members need to ask themselves critical questions such as:

_____ Have I invited parents to the program?

_____ Have I personally spoken to each child's parent?

_____ Do I have a record of each parent contact and information about their family?

_____ Can I name each parent and student?

_____ Do I plan lessons with ideas of involving families?

Developing partnerships with parents requires a sincere and dedicated effort by staff. Staff should invite involvement knowing:

- Face-to-face requests are always the most powerful approach.
- When a request is specific and has a limited time frame it will be easier to get help.
- Be clear about the task given, and put details in writing.
- Have parents work in teams to share the burden. Working in teams is a good way to get new people involved, while also strengthening parent connections.
- Be sincere in what you are asking. Parents will know if it is busy work rather than filling a need.
- Realize that parents who are asked to do something need space, access to resources, and a place to work.

Chapter Summary

Parents can be partners. Invite them to help, welcome them, work with them, and great things can happen! Often, projects completed by parents far surpass any vision you had.

As you plan your menu for involving parents and families in your program, consider:

- How effectively have you engaged parents and families in your program?
- What practices are working for you?
- Are certain staff members effectively involving parents? Have you recognized their efforts, or suggested to another staff member to model their efforts?
- Does your menu give parents options for how they can be involved?
- Have you met the needs of volunteers within your program?
- Have volunteering efforts been a one-time event or ongoing?
- What menu choices are you giving parents and families to be involved?
- Are there new ideas you could add to your menu?

Refer to Appendix A for the Chapter 3 checklist for preparing your menu.

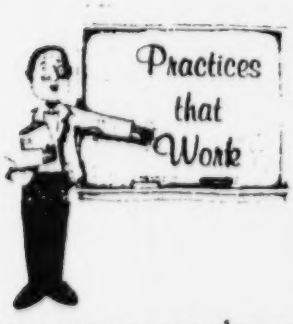
Support Learning at Home

The time children spend at your program is only a portion of their day, week, or lifetime. Events outside of your program impact their learning and preparation for school. In other words, School+Home=Learning. As the educational leader, it is your responsibility to work with parents and consider what more can be done in your program to support learning at home.

- Most parents will take the time to help their children learn, and often program leaders must guide parents to increase their success at home.
- Realize that the home has great potential to contribute to the learning process. Consider the following questions in assessing the ability of your program to support learning at home:
  - How do we use our combined time to the greatest advantage?
  - How can our program impact the quality of parent/child time?
  - In what ways can we support the parents' efforts to enhance their child's learning?
- Use what you know about your families to compliment the positive efforts they are already making to support learning. Praise their efforts of reading, completing homework, practicing skills, etc. When you acknowledge that they are doing these "right things," it will encourage them to continue the process.
- Acknowledge that families have many demands on their time. Consider how the activities you encourage can be quality time events. Can travel time be used to support learning? Can hands-on learning stations during parent visits share skills?

- Identify what home resources are available for activities, and consider how you can make necessary resources available. If activities can be easily accomplished it is more likely families will do them.
- Early care and education includes the ability to work with everyday resources to compliment learning. For example: "Find a product label that has red on it. We welcome you to bring the label or product to share at school."

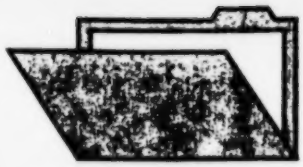
_____ Share information about learning and developmental stages
_____ Share learning goals with parents
_____ Provide parent programs
_____ Send information home about upcoming events
_____ Report information learned to families
_____ Inform parents of children's progress
_____ Make home visits
_____ Support valuable activities
_____ Provide ideas for at-home activities
_____ Send home teaching resources
_____ Provide a lending library of literacy bags and educational kits
_____ Loan parents materials for home reinforcement



Share Information About Learning and Developmental Stages

Children arrive in the world without instruction manuals, and parents often learn parenting skills by trial and error. Professionals who work with children can support parents by providing information. Keep parents aware of normal development patterns and provide information that will support their understanding of their child's growth. There are many resources available that can be shared with families.

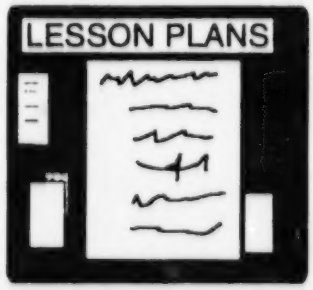
- Share booklets, information pages, public resources, magazine articles, and news clippings discussing how children learn and develop.



- Create a reference file with information to assist parents who have questions. When you see a family facing an issue you can say, "Here is some information I have read. I made a copy for you if you would like to look at it."
- Display posters with developmental milestones where staff and families can reference them.

Share Learning Goals with Parents

What do you expect your children to learn? Your planning should reflect individual needs as well as class wide content. As you set learning goals, share them with parents. This process of sharing may be the most important part of your "Parent Involvement Menu". There are many ways to share this information:



- Post your lesson plans on the classroom door or bulletin board.
- Write a newsletter and include your learning themes and goals.
- Put sticky notes or labels on children. For example: "Tomorrow will be blue day. Wear something blue." See Chapter One - "Sharing Information With Families", *Reminder Labels.*
- At the beginning of the year, share a class outline of topics you intend to cover.
- Make frequent parent updates about learning progress.
- Make a monthly or weekly calendar.
- At conferences and other face-to-face opportunities, share class and individual learning plans.
- Use your "one-minute conferences" to tell parents the skills being covered. See Chapter One: "Sharing Information With Families", *Face-to-Face Conversations.*

Provide Parent Programs

Parents who have been provided with specific information about what you are doing in your program can support learning in the home. This idea has been shared in "Welcoming Parents and Families," Chapter Two. Revisit plans you made for your "involvement menu" from the practices there.

- Provide parent programs focused on parenting skills. Topics to consider for a parent program are discipline, reading with your child, or transition strategies.
- During any event you can feature a parent-learning center focusing on a specific skill. For example, if tying shoes is a skill many children in your class are practicing, set up a tying station. Show the parent the two approaches to shoe tying: demonstrate the process of making two loops to cross and tie, and also show the approach of making one loop and wrapping around and going through. Share with families the language you use to talk children through the steps.
- Listen to parents' needs.
- Keep programs short and simple.
- Remember it is important to summarize information and share it with those who did not attend. See Chapter Two "Welcoming Parents and Families," *Schedule Special Events.*
- Allow time for parent questions and sharing of advice in program plans.

What can you do when the parents you really want to attend a program are not there?

- ✔ Make a personal invitation to these target families.
- ✔ Ask these families to attend for a special reason. For example, give them a task to do, or their child a role.
- ✔ Ask another family to invite them and maybe even serve as their host that evening.
- ✔ Share a tape recording of the program with the family.
- ✔ Make copies of handouts and information shared for those who did not attend.

Send Information Home About Upcoming Units

Parents informed of what you will be covering are better able to take action to support it. Letting parents know topics invites involvement. For example, you are teaching the circle shape this week. Invite parents to send in round snacks, look for round shapes in their home, or share a book about shapes or circles. Look at the variety of ways suggested previously for sharing learning goals, and use them to share information about upcoming units.

Report Information Learned to Families

This suggestion supplements the one above. When a unit is completed, share the unit's goals and activities with parents. This reporting says to parents, "Here are things we did and what your child should know." Seeing is believing for parents, just as it is for children. Ways to showcase completed activities might include:

- Setting up a display of the unit's goals and accomplishments.
- Taking a series of pictures to represent unit activities.
- Creating a bulletin board display.
- Having children draw pictures, adding narration to explain.
- Making comments on children's work to provide additional details. For example, "This is _____ doing the stop, drop, and roll we learned at the fire station".
- Making a short video summary. (Be sure every child is shown on the tape.)
- Having children tell you what they learned and post their comments for parents to read.
- Making a scrapbook or mini-book.
- Including this information in your program newsletter.

Reporting to parents also serves the purpose of saying, "Look at all we are doing with your child." When you sell your program well, you build parent confidence.

Inform Parents of Children's Progress

Parents want their child to be successful, and want to know the specifics about how their child is doing. However, caution needs to be used that this concern does not create excessive pressure for the children. Showing progress is an informative way for parents to witness the growth of knowledge and skills.

Showing progress can be as simple as creating a file folder for each child:

- Put actual work samples in the folders or make copies of work they want to take home.
- Show a chronological sample of work in order to help parents see the progress made by their child. For example: show a September vs. May writing or art sample to reflect developing skills.
- Make short observations recorded over time. For example, a child may say, "Give me the red toy". This simple request indicates they know the color red. These short observation records will document the development of social and academic skills, and is also a way to record special memories that parents may enjoy hearing.
- Make notes on index cards that you can keep in your pocket, or write them on labels or sticky notes that can be stuck to children's folders.

Share this information with families so they can celebrate the success of learning. Discuss this information when meeting with parents and create a plan to work together to develop additional skills.

Make Home Visits

Research, such as Kirwan (1998), has clearly supported that home visiting programs produce effective results. Making home visits is a strategy used by a variety of programs, many of which do this as a "get acquainted" technique. This will allow you the opportuni-

ty to gather information about children and families, as they tend to be more relaxed in their home setting.

Another purpose for home visiting is to give educators a chance to model and teach skills to families in their home environment. The early childhood field has recognized parents as first teachers of their children, so it is important to introduce skills using many of the resources available in a child's home surroundings.

When you make home visits:

- Make parents comfortable about your plan to visit their home. Get their agreement and schedule a time that is convenient for them. Share the purpose of your visit, what you will do, the length of your stay, who will be coming, and how they can cancel if necessary.
- Give follow-up reminders of your visit. Follow the 3 X 3 rule (3 times/3 ways of sharing). Be prepared with a positive way to communicate with families who don't make their appointment with you. Booklet co-author Bev Schumacher creates door hangers to be used when this happens. Even missed connections can be opportunities to build the relationship with that family.
- Have a lesson plan for the home visit, just as classroom educators have a lesson plan for their daily activities.
- Be sure the ideas shared are practical and appropriate to the age of the children. You want the families to continue the activity when you leave.
- Use the resources families will have available in their homes, when possible. Small gifts of supplies or books may be helpful if funding allows. For example:
  - Children can use canned goods to do a matching activity.
  - Three sizes of chairs and bowls can be used in telling the story of The Three Bears.
  - Child-sized scissors can be given to families to support fine motor skills.

- Film canisters filled with primary colors can be given with cotton swabs for paint and color exploration.
- Plastic cups and bowls can be sorted by size and color.

- Have parents model the skills you are teaching. When the family is comfortable, have the activity repeated by them, with the parent leading the activity.
- Use question statements that begin with words like "how" and "what," as this invites parents to share information. The home visitor should spend more time listening than talking.
- Consider the families' feelings. If families are totally uncomfortable with a visit to their home, arrange to meet at a location less threatening, such as a park or restaurant.
- Take materials that may be loaned to families, if possible. The home visit allows the educator to model the use of the material.

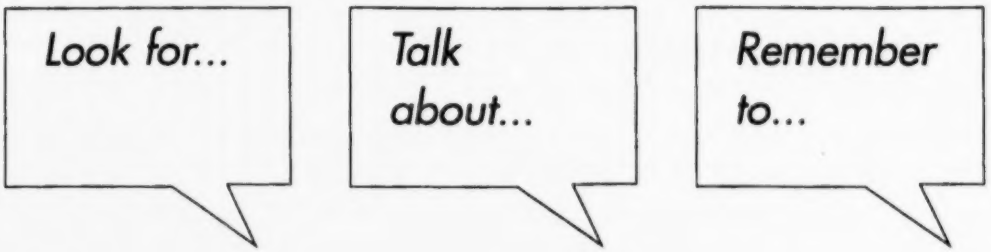
Support Valuable Activities

Professionals are often able to influence what parents do at home. For example, the educator who repeatedly encourages families to go to the library may get more families reading books together, or the educator who asks parents, "What bedtime story did you read last night?" may encourage parents to read more. Educators who raise the awareness of families by encouraging such activities may get families to do more of them together.

Some things you can suggest to parents:

- Attend community events
- Watch public television shows
- Role play nursery rhymes and stories
- Look for letters, numbers, signs and shapes while doing these activities

When there are face-to-face opportunities give conversation starters like:



Provide Ideas for At-Home Activities

Students' learning days are not long enough to build every needed skill. Parents are teaching partners, but do not assume that they automatically adopt this role. Parents need ideas and encouragement to work on skills at home. If a child is working to learn colors, for example, give the family ideas to enrich their child's skills:

- Ask the child to find the color " ____ " when reading their bedtime story tonight.
- Suggest they eat a food tonight that is the color "____".
- Brainstorm ideas of home activities to reinforce every topic you teach. You could do this with your teaching team or with parents.
- Create a file of ideas. There are web sites, resource books, and marketed resources that provide activity ideas. Explore these kinds of resources for your program.
- Write the ideas on a calendar to send home for parents to do one each day.

Specific ideas spark parent involvement. Simply stating that we are learning colors does not get the same involvement as specific suggested ideas. Sharing ideas in face-to-face contacts with parents is a golden opportunity to invite their involvement. Carry this idea a step further and give them the necessary resources to complete the activities.

Send Home Teaching Resources

Getting learning to continue at home sometimes requires prompting. Suggesting that children look for red things might make that activity happen, but giving children a paper bag with the assignment to bring in things that are red often takes the idea to an action activity. Hands-on learning is an effective learning process. When resource props are given, children have an opportunity to actively do a task.

- When tools are provided the family has more than just an idea to work with. For example, give children paper with the request to trace something round to share with the class.
- Learning tools need not be costly. Often they can be child or teacher made. Consider, for example:
  - A finger play done frequently and loved by the children. Imagine the effect of providing the words and stick puppets to support parents doing it at home.
  - Imagine a measuring task made possible by a teacher note and a piece of yarn placed in a baggie.
  - A shape cut out can support letter, number, or shape activities.
  - A unit about time can be supported with a student-made paper plate clock.
  - Happy and sad feelings can be discussed using a paper plate puppet with happy and sad faces on opposite sides.

These are easy things early childhood programs can do. Giving tools to parents stimulates home activities. Several excellent sources of ideas and materials include Learning Props and Parenting Resources.

Provide a Lending Library of Literacy Bags and Educational Kits

Sharing books and educational kits empowers parents and family involvement. Consider this situation to open your thinking about this idea:

There is a family served by your program that has limited resources, and the child's language skills need enrichment. Imagine the difference possible if the child were read to every night. Consider the powerful impact the family could have if they read to the child. The family is very willing to do this but have few books at home and cannot get to a community library.

- Would having the program's books available to the child make a difference in his or her learning?
- Would a lending library affect the parent's opportunity to be involved?
- Could it have a learning impact upon other family members?

This practice can be used with any population, but is extremely valuable for programs where home resources are limited. Having created and managed a resource lending library for a large learning center, booklet co-author Bev Schumacher has extensive experience with this practice. It was one of the most effective practices used at the program.

The development of a lending library requires an investment of effort and resources. Here are some thoughts to consider in using this practice:

- A lending library can grow over a period of time. Starting with books alone is one easy step for programs to take. Purchasing low cost books or seeking books through a collection drive can get a lending library started.
- There are many options for storing books: books can be placed in plastic zip style bags; there are styles of bags sold to libraries that can be purchased; fabric bags can be sewn or purchased; and backpacks can be used, as can novelty containers such as lunch boxes, or containers with a particular theme. (One program had theme bags with a beach bag containing books of that theme, a picnic basket with related contents, a paint can with matching items, and so on.)

- You will need to identify the books with labels or markings. This will help families recognize them as belonging to your program.
- Send some type of information sheet with the book. It may contain information linking the book's subject to a learning skill, or give parents additional ideas of how to extend learning. Caps For Sale, for example, encourages counting activities. Be aware that some homes will not have many caps, so children may be encouraged to gather pillows or plastic lids and stack them on their heads to see how many they can balance.
- Some programs expand their lending library with puppets, file folder activities, and other educational activities. Consider sending home a magnifying glass and interesting things to examine.
- There are also lending book products available on the market. Staff members could brainstorm or create lending bags in a workshop setting. Librarians have books with story stretchers, which may be helpful in your development process.
- Develop a management system for your lending library. Some things to consider are:
  - How long will items be loaned out?
  - How are they loaned out? (Some programs allow students to check out, while others require parents to come in.) Keep in mind many families that could benefit from this practice may not be those that come to school often. Consider loaning materials to every family.
  - What staff member will be responsible for the library?
  - How will late returns and missing materials be handled?
  - Who will put in the initial labor to get the library set up? (Consider parents, volunteers, older students, service organizations)
  - Where will the books be stored?
  - How will the lending library be funded and maintained?
  - How will you get family feedback and measure effectiveness?

Does this sound like an idea you want on your parent and family involvement menu? If yes, identify your program needs and begin one step at a time.

Loan Parents Materials for Home Reinforcement

This idea is similar to the idea above, but takes the idea further by recommending the loaning of durable materials. The materials loaned to families could be books, videos, toys, games, puzzles, computers, or a variety of other resources. Consider using zip lock bags, backpacks, storage bins or novelty bags to transport the resources.

An advantage of using this approach is that the items are already created, and because they are built for children, they are durable and appropriate for use. Staff time is needed for administrating the library, but the tedious job of creating the lending resources is avoided. Another advantage is that once the investment is made, programs have durable resources that can be used over an extended time period. However, serving a large population this approach could be costly, and it may also require creating a storage area.

Be assured that if the materials encourage quality learning, the investment and labor is worth it. Programs alone cannot assure that students learn and achieve, but when the family is empowered to help it is more likely that the child will be successful. The total of what is achieved working together is greater than anything accomplished alone. That is why partnerships, with families and parents, are so important.

What can you do if staff hesitate to loan materials to parents because they are afraid they won't be returned?

- Is a community library servicing your community? Have they given up on the loaning process, or can you team with them to make materials available to families?
- Began loaning a few materials at a time, and promptly react to overdue items.
- Explain to parents the goals you have for loaning them these materials and ask if they are willing to work with you. Consider having them sign a contract to support the process.
- Do a "make and take" workshop with staff and families, where they help to make the resources for your learning library.

Chapter Summary

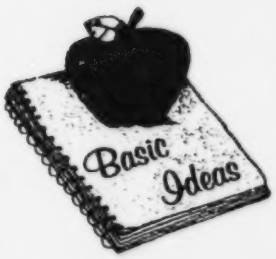
Successful programs reach out to parents and families and actively seek their involvement in supporting learning at home. The power of working as partners surpasses any achievement possibly done alone. Remember, "Together we achieve more".

It will be necessary to encourage and support some families more than others. The menu you offer will not be identical for every child and family. Some families will need resources, while others might not. Some children will be at one development level and others may need tasks more suitable for another skill level. Knowing the families and children is critical to meeting the challenge of supporting learning at home. Consider adding some of these practices to your menu of *"Supporting Learning at Home"*.

Refer to Appendix A for the Chapter Four checklist for preparing your menu.

Chaper Five

Working with the Community



Successful early childhood programs are connected to the community, as all early childhood teachers should know the community from which their students come. In addition, bringing people from the community into the classroom can benefit programs and enrich what you provide for the children.

_____ Maintain a list of local field trip ideas
_____ Seek community resource people
_____ Take your program to the community
_____ Know your community and neighborhood's culture
_____ Maintain contact with community employers
_____ Seek financial resources
_____ Promote community activities and services

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Maintain a List of Local Field Trip Ideas

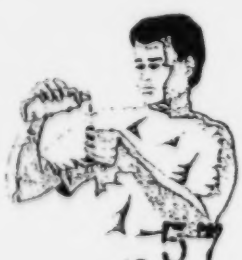
Community locations are potential opportunities for field trips.

- Consider visiting: companies, businesses, libraries, museums, farms, and stores. Many welcome and want children to visit and learn. Maintain lists of field trip contacts, phone numbers, and locations for future planning.
- Announce visiting plans early to encourage parent involvement. Early notification of parents gives them time to make arrangements to attend. Often parents can help in making field trip arrangements, and some parents might even have special connections with sites.
- Visit field trip sites in advance to plan with them. Set goals so the visit accomplishes what was intended, and communicate these goals to the site personnel and families.
- Give chaperones schedules, trip highlights, assignments, learning goals, and so forth, to better guide the touring children.
- Ask parents and field trip sites for feedback following visits.
- Follow your visit with a "Thank you".

Seek Community Resource People

Programs can enrich learning with well-chosen visitors to the classroom.

- Invite parents and guests who have special expertise and interests. For



example, parents or visitors with art or craft skills might provide demonstrations and materials. Others might be able to share information that expands cultural awareness.

- Community resource volunteers are frequently anxious for an invitation. Consider inviting musicians, dancers, craftsman, carpenters, builders, photographers, museum representatives, wildlife experts, etc. Many professionals consider reaching out to educate children one of their priorities.

Take Your Program to the Community

- Participation in community art displays, parades, plays, and other performances can be highlights of your year. The public relations benefit of being active in the community can be substantial. Groups can provide children enriching experiences programs or parents cannot. Another plus to this idea is that those who provide the opportunities will become more aware of your program and students.
- Celebrate special days and events with your community. Consider recognizing "The Week of the Young Child," childcare recognition days, or local historical or cultural celebrations. These can become powerful and unforgettable learning experiences for children and families.
- Invite your local media to feature the special events of your program.

Know Your Community and Neighborhood's Culture

Staff members should be knowledgeable about the community around them.

- Share community information with fellow staff members, parents, and

What can you do?

- ✔ Learn about community culture and study its history.
- ✔ Invite guests from community organizations to share with you.
- ✔ Invite a local celebrity, government official or shop owner to talk to staff.

children through a walking tour, noting such things as buildings, parks and businesses.
- Teachers and parents might enjoy hearing a speaker or taking a driving tour.
- Newcomers will especially need to have this information shared with them.
- Classroom visitors can share stories, music, foods or other local features.

These practices can expand the children's growing awareness of the world around them.

Maintain Contact with Community Employers

Your program's contact with employers in your community can have many benefits for parents, the program, and the children.

Programs in larger communities may choose to focus on learning about major employers first.

- It is likely that some of your parents work for these large employers, and perhaps the employer's policies would allow parents to volunteer and participate in program activities during work hours.
- Sometimes community employers can provide field trips, speakers, surplus materials, or even financial support.
- Establishing positive, open contact with personnel departments or managers could be helpful in maintaining enrollment.

Establishing relationships with these employers could result in more involvement in the program. When they know you, they might also call you as needs and opportunities arise.

Seek Financial Resources

Numerous agencies, organizations, businesses, and facilities have free or reduced services and opportunities for programs. Some examples:

- Research your community, local and state agencies for special performance funds.
- Arts, humanities, or history groups may have small grants for which your program could apply. Several teachers, programs, or schools could work together to seek these funds.

Promote Community Activities and Services

Sometimes programs or families are not fully aware of available services.

- If a local agency, arts group, library, museum, gallery or an organization is conducting events, ask them for flyers or announcements to share with families. When these are posted at the school or sent home with your support, they encourage parent involvement. Remember, families may need your support to explore things that are new to them.
- Keep a list of services in your community for parent referral, and share with families in need the names of community services able to help them.
- Include community information at your "information station". See Maintain Parent Information Stations in Chapter Two, "**Welcoming Families**".
- Invite community media to give coverage to special program events.

Chapter Summary

Reaching out to and becoming actively involved in the community can result in additional benefits to your program. It is neither possible nor beneficial to be isolated from them.

The word collaboration is often used when talking about programs working together. These collaborative efforts are often mutually beneficial to all involved. For example, community knowledge of your program might enhance recruitment and services, and as you reach out, your program makes it easier for others to reach you as well.

Successful programs are not isolated from their community. Instead, the community becomes an extension of their program. Your program, staff, families, and children can benefit and grow through active involvement with the community. When you prepare your menu consider how you can build community relationships that work together.

Refer to Appendix A for the Chapter Five checklist for preparing your menu.

Let's Get Started!

The involvement of parents and families will strengthen the success of your program. This booklet has given you some basic ideas and practices to consider. Let these ideas:

- Nourish your program,
- Build partnerships with parents, and
- Guide your way to success with each child.

Many involvement practices have been presented, yet there are countless other ideas that could also be considered. One menu cannot be created to satisfy the needs of every program. Make your plans for parent and family involvement reflect the diversity and uniqueness of your program. This will require effective two-way communication, so involve families, staff, and community members as you prepare a menu that will meet the needs of the children and families you serve.

When a good menu is presented most parents and families will make selections that will be satisfying. However, realize that even when offering a complete and exciting menu, not all families will desire or choose the same menu items. Some families may come and review the menu and decide not to stay, or stay and not order from the menu. Be alert to all aspects of your program, knowing that time spent building parent and family involvement will enhance your program.

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Appendix A

Review the practices in each checklist. Which are you already using in your parent and family involvement menu? Consider adding to your menu some of the ideas in the checklist.

The checklist is a "quick-reference" with each item explained in the "Practices That Work" section of each chapter.

Chapter 1- Sharing Information with Parents and Families

_____ Face-to face conversations
_____ Positive phone calls
_____ Happy notes
_____ Awards and certificates
_____ Greeting cards, post cards, and invitations
_____ Handwritten notes in response to parent requests
_____ E-mail/FAXES
_____ Reminder stickers
_____ Parents sign and return items
_____ Notes on children's work

Chapter 2 - Welcoming Parents and Families

_____ Mention "parents and families" in program descriptions
_____ Provide parent places
_____ Maintain parent information stations
_____ Schedule special events

Family + Fun + Food = Successful Program

_____ Prepare parent nametags for visits and events
_____ Recognize parents at school programs
_____ Establish awards and certificates for parent contributions
_____ Approach every parent with a smile and positive greeting
_____ Be sensitive to families' diverse needs
_____ Promptly acknowledge parent questions and concerns

Chapter 3 - Involving Parents and Families in the Program

_____ Ask parents for ideas, suggestions and feedback
_____ Involve parents in decision making
_____ Invite parents to help complete program work
_____ Invite parents to bring supplies
_____ Train parents for school experiences
_____ Use parents' help at class events and fieldtrips
_____ Use parents' expertise
_____ Acknowledge the help received from parents
_____ Train staff to work with parents

Chapter 4- Supporting Learning at Home

_____ Share information about learning and developmental stages
_____ Share learning goals with parents
_____ Provide parent programs
_____ Send information home about upcoming events
_____ Report information learned to families
_____ Inform parents of children's progress
_____ Make home visits
_____ Support valuable activities
_____ Provide ideas for at-home activities
_____ Send home teaching resources
_____ Provide a lending library of literacy bags and educational kits
_____ Loan parents materials for home reinforcement

Chapter 5- Working With the Community

_____ Maintain a list of local field trip ideas
_____ Seek community resource people
_____ Take your program to the community
_____ Know your community and neighborhood's culture
_____ Maintain contact with community employers
_____ Seek financial resources
_____ Promote community activities and services

About the Authors.

Authors of this book have worked with parents, children, teachers, and administrators, and with childcare, public and private preschools, Head Start, and primary programs. Their experiences and workshop presentations have given them the opportunity to gather ideas from a wide variety of programs.

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